

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

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## Henry O'Reilly

By DEXTER PERKINS

Henry O'Reilly (or O'Rielly, as he insisted on calling himself in later life) was, no doubt, not one of the greatest figures connected with the city of Rochester. He was not born here; he did not spend the major part of his life here; and when he died in 1884, he had long since outlived the period of his major usefulness. He never attained distinction of the first order; he was volatile, improvident and — so his enemies said — quarrelsome; he was a great man for starting something, and a poor man for finishing anything — with the large exception of his *Sketches of Rochester*, published in 1838. But none the less he is an extremely interesting person. He had warmth and brilliance; he identified himself with a whole variety of good causes, and contributed materially to all of them; he had a kind of itch to improve the little world in which he moved; and he succeeded in doing so in many ways. He was also the storm center in one of the most interesting technological and business controversies in the period before the Civil War, the controversy over the telegraph; and though he lacked the constructive genius that characterized Hiram Sibley, another Rochesterian of far more practical capacity, he was for a time the idol of those Americans who saw in the telegraph a menacing monopoly and played a part, stormy and dramatic, in the development of a great industry. When you begin to study O'Reilly, you may not unqualifiedly admire him, but you are sure to find him worth knowing; and because he is well worth historical acquaintance, I am going to sketch in this number of *Rochester History* the essentials of his career.

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## The Young Immigrant

O'Reilly was born in Carrickmacross, County Monaghan, Ireland, on February 6, 1806. Like many another Irishman, in later years Henry was prone to discuss his ancestry in terms that suggested a distinguished lineage. He seems to have dwelt with some pleasure upon a certain great grand-uncle who was Bishop of the Diocese, and he was also proud to relate that his maternal grandfather, Henry Ledbetter, had once been offered a peerage, and was the confidential physician of the Bresfords, a family then powerful in Ireland. But Henry's immediate origins were less impressive. Of his father, very little is known; he seems to have been a merchant; he failed in business in the depression following the Napoleonic wars; and he was, through the rigor of a brother-in-law, confined in a debtor's prison in 1816. Though later he followed the rest of the O'Reilly family, that is, his wife, and son and daughter, to America, he seems to have played no important part in Henry's life, and even the date and place of his death are uncertain.

Henry came to the United States at the tender age of ten, with his mother and sister, and landed, as millions of immigrants have landed since, in the City of New York. There he was received by his "good uncle," Edward Ledbetter, but his uncle's benevolence did not extend so far as to provide support for his youthful relative, and still at the age of ten, O'Reilly was apprenticed to Baptiste Irvine, editor of the *New York Columbian*. The articles of apprenticeship were for a term of eight years, and for the greater part of the period O'Reilly was to serve without pay. He was to be given sufficient meat, drink and clothing; and he was to be instructed in the mysteries of the art of printing, in reading, writing and arithmetic, and in the rudiments of the "latin and french languages." In exchange for these manifest advantages O'Reilly agreed "not to waste his master's goods, not to commit fornication or contract matrimony, not to play at cards, dice or any unlawful game, not to absent himself day or night from his master's service without leave, and not to haunt alehouses, taverns, or play-houses."

There was to be plenty of variety in Henry O'Reilly's career as time went on, but the termination of his first apprenticeship was no fault of his, and it is probable that a similar statement may be made

with regard to his other frequent changes of employment in these early years. The papers of the time were frequently ill-supported; Irvine gave up the editorship of the *Columbian* less than a year after the signing of Henry's articles of apprenticeship. The boy seems to have worked for some time thereafter in the printing office of Clayton and Kingsland; but in 1823 he was offered a place on the *New York Patriot*, and there he first began to take part in politics, becoming, as was natural in the circumstances, an ardent partisan of the candidacy of Andrew Jackson for the Presidency of the United States. In 1824, indeed, in company with his employer, Colonel Charles K. Gardner, Henry paid a visit to Washington, and was presented to Old Hickory. Before the year was out, we find him moving to Kinderhook, New York, to become the printer of the local paper, the *Herald*, and we cannot help believing that he had by now formed a connection with Martin Van Buren, and that he was fairly launched in a reasonably active political career.

But Kinderhook was only a way station to Rochester. While serving on the *Patriot*, O'Reilly had had as a fellow-compositor one Luther Tucker. Tucker had a friend who wished to establish at Rochester a daily newspaper, and he was offered the business management of the paper, and asked to select a competent editor. Thus, in 1826, at the age of twenty, the young Henry moved once more, and on October 21, 1826, he issued the first number of the *Rochester Daily Advertiser*, which, with changes of name, and, indeed, changes of policy, has none the less endured down to our own day.

### The Editor and Politician

The young editor had walked into the center of a major political storm. These were the days of the anti-Masonic agitation. In September of 1826, William Morgan, who had written and promoted a book which purported to reveal the secrets of Masonry, had been abducted from the jail at Canandaigua, and had disappeared. Now in Western New York at this same period, the foes of the Jackson party were looking for a political issue, and particularly for an issue that would wean away from the dominant political faction some of the more democratic elements in the population. They found what they wanted in the disappearance of Morgan. Here was an opportunity to raise a

terrific hue and cry over the secret society of Masonry and its aristocratic implications. The opportunity became still more profitable when a body was washed ashore from Lake Ontario, which, it was speedily rumored, and afterwards alleged in a coroner's inquest, was the body of Morgan himself. Political excitement, therefore, mounted higher and higher, and in due course gave rise to a new political party which described itself as the Anti-Masonic party.

Into this interesting political scene Henry O'Reilly was precipitated in the fall of 1826. He began his editorship of the *Advertiser*, as a wise editor would do, by professing the highest impartiality with regard to politics. But O'Reilly, as a detached and neutral observer of the political scene, or indeed of anything else, is an O'Reilly that never existed. He already had his political predilections; his Irish blood yearned for a fight; and before long he was involved in the controversy over anti-Masonry, and was locked in conflict with one of the most formidable figures in the history of political journalism.

In 1826 Thurlow Weed was editor of the *Rochester Telegraph*, a man thirty-four years of age, who might well resent the appearance of a stripling of twenty as his competitor in the thriving frontier community. Weed was not the originator, but soon became one of the participants, in the anti-Masonic agitation, and one of the leaders in the attempt to capitalize the disappearance and the death of Morgan in the formation of the new party. It is not likely, having regard to the newspaper methods of the time, and to the extraordinary violence of journalistic controversy, that O'Reilly would long have escaped the shafts of his rival. But the hot-headed Irishman apparently offered the first provocation for the outburst of hostilities. From the first he had been suspicious of the inquest that had attended the finding of the alleged corpse of Morgan on the shores of Lake Ontario, and had not hesitated to express his suspicions that there was something very peculiar about the whole business. Soon a most interesting story came to his ears. In the arguments that took place in the frontier community the question of the identity of the body of Morgan naturally took a prominent place. In one of these arguments, so the story began to circulate, Thurlow Weed was reported to have said, in informal conversation, that at any rate the corpse was a "good-enough Morgan till after election." Later on, when confronted with this charge, Weed denied it categorically, and declared that what he had said was that it

was a good enough Morgan till another body was found, a comment which, it must be admitted, was hardly less cynical than that of which he was accused. But when O'Reilly published the first of these two versions of his rival's words, he found himself the object of the most bitter attacks on the part of Weed. He was pilloried as a liar; he was described in the pages of the *Telegraph* as a "Mason-jack," a peculiarly offensive epithet in the current political controversy, and all the more so in the case of O'Reilly, since O'Reilly was not a Mason; and he was in due course, fixed with a libel suit which hung over his head for thirteen years, and was naturally a source of considerable embarrassment. In such circumstances, to put it bluntly, O'Reilly found that he could not take it, and in July, 1827, he temporarily withdrew from the scene, alleging feeble health in part as an excuse. After a visit to Niagara Falls, he went back to New York City, and there again took up printing at the Methodist Printing Office which had been one of the scenes of his employment some years before.

But the itch for politics was strong in O'Reilly, and a most exciting and possibly a most rewarding Presidential campaign was approaching. The Old Hero, the veteran of New Orleans, the idol of the people, Andrew Jackson, was running for the Presidency. The campaign was a delirious one; indeed, never before had so large a part of the electorate gone to the polls. How could a good party man be content to print Methodist tracts instead of ringing Jacksonian speeches? There could be but one answer to this question, so O'Reilly, at the solicitation of Mr. Tucker, his original employer, went back to Rochester, and took part as editor of the *Advertiser* once more in the campaign which was to elevate Old Hickory to the Presidency of the United States. And now O'Reilly appears for the first time, but not the last, if not in the guise of an officeseeker, at least in the guise of one much interested in the offices. In 1828 Abelard Reynolds was Postmaster of Rochester, a position which he had held since the very beginnings of Rochester's civic history. Reynolds, of course, was a supporter of the conservative cause, and of John Quincy Adams in the campaign of 1828. It was obvious, at any rate to the Jacksonians, that a new appointment was in order. So the editor of the *Advertiser* journeyed to Washington, and secured the appointment of a good Jackson man, John B. Elwood, in place of Reynolds. He also brought back from his visit to the capital another political plum, the collectorship

of the Genesee Revenue District, which was awarded to General Jacob Gould.

One might have thought that by this time O'Reilly would have been in a fair way to settle down. But in 1830 he married, and his bride, Marcia Brooks, was the daughter of a land-holder of the upper Genesee country, in the neighborhood of Nunda. Thither the editor of the *Advertiser* removed in May of 1830, hoping no doubt to profit from his father-in-law's plans to establish a village in that neighborhood, and thoughtfully providing himself with the job of postmaster in the new locality, a matter which was not difficult in view of his services to the administration in power.

O'Reilly's removal to Brooks Grove, as the place was called, hardly does credit to his business sagacity. It is true that in 1830, when for the second time he left Rochester, the town was experiencing its first recession, following the boom created by the building of the Erie Canal. But there was no good reason to believe that the Genesee mill town and canal port had exhausted its potentialities; indeed those with greater confidence were soon justified as growth was resumed and the village became a city in 1834. Nor was there anything about the job of postmastership at Brooks' Grove that could be described as challenging to a young man now 24, who had substantial capacities, and a growing circle of friends. So once again O'Reilly's exile was a brief one, and the campaign of 1832 saw the young Irishman, now a citizen, back once more in the editorship of the *Advertiser*, and warmly engaged in re-electing Andrew Jackson to the Presidency of the United States. For his services in this regard he received the post of Deputy-Collector for the Genesee District, and this together with his journalistic activities, provided him with a reasonable pecuniary reward. He was now to settle down for a while — in so far as it was in his nature to settle down, and in the course of the next ten years he played an important part in the life of the young community. In some ways he was at his best during these next ten years, active, public-spirited, the friend of many liberal causes, and the author of one of the best books of its kind, a book that is invaluable to any student of Rochester history.

## The Rochester Civic Reformer

Amongst the objects of O'Reilly's activity during his ten years' continuous residence in Rochester none was more important than the enlargement of the Erie Canal. The canal had been finished in 1825, and had, of course, been the major factor in the astoundingly rapid growth of the city on the Genesee. Constructed at a cost of around \$10,000,000, it had been amazingly profitable, and it had been possible for the state to retire a loan of seven and three quarter million dollars from the revenues of the first ten years. The chief drawbacks were its size, particularly its depth of only four feet, and the flimsy character of the locks and other features of its construction. It was natural that there should arise a demand for its reconstruction and enlargement, and this movement was closely connected with a movement for the reduction of the tolls. But the question soon became a controversial one; there was much opposition in the legislature to a new borrowing program; and it took a long and vigorous agitation before the enlargement of the canal could be carried into effect.

Into this agitation O'Reilly threw himself with characteristic ardor. He was, of course, by no means alone in his advocacy of enlargement. Indeed, the opinion of leading Rochester citizens of both political parties coincided as to the necessity of such a policy. But his name appears again and again amongst the men who took the deepest interest in the project, and his views, it would appear, had a greater and greater influence as time went on. The canal commissioners first recommended the enlargement of the canal in their report of the spring of 1835. The legislature, very much under the influence of those short-sighted individuals who thought borrowing to be inherently immoral, enacted in May a law providing that the surplus tolls from the Canal might be devoted to the deepening of the waterway, or to the construction of further locks, if needed. In the fall of 1835 a committee of Rochester citizens, of which O'Reilly was a member, passed resolutions expressing pleasure at this initial step and the profound conviction of the importance of a forward looking policy with regard to the canal in general. But the method of providing for enlargement through surplus revenues was soon seen to be inadequate. The sum that was found to be necessary to carry through the program

determined upon by the canal commissioners was found to be at least equal to the original expense of constructing the canal. To expect that such a sum could be found through tolls would mean that the much-desired improvement would be long-delayed. Confronted with this fact, friends of the canal urged a borrowing program to effect the necessary construction.

It may well be that O'Reilly was one of the first to formulate such a policy and to join with others in bringing it to fruition. (He was never afraid to borrow, either personally or otherwise.) At any rate, on the 30th of December, 1836, he was one of three citizens of Rochester who addressed a public meeting assembled at the courthouse, to consider the canal question, and out of this meeting came resolutions urging new loans based upon the canal revenues, and a call for a convention of the people of western New York to press for similar action. This convention met in Rochester on January 18, 1837, and attracted immense attention. It appointed a central executive committee, of which O'Reilly was chairman, for placing the matter before the public. This committee engaged in a successful agitation which had its final fruits in the law of April 18, 1838, authorizing a loan of four million dollars, (not as much as had been desired), for the improvement and enlargement of the canal.

O'Reilly's success in bringing about the end which he had in view was due in part to a very energetic and skillful agitation. But it was due in part, also, to the particular circumstances of the time. The Jackson administration had hardly gone out of office when there followed one of the most disastrous depressions in the early history of the country, and one which was extremely severely felt in western New York. Of course in general the idea of borrowing to create employment was hardly the economic gospel of the 1830's. But curiously enough in New York state there was considerable sentiment for just such a course, as was to be strikingly exemplified when William H. Seward was elected Governor in the fall of 1838. The passage of the canal law, it seems hardly doubtful, was in part assisted by the fact that here was a means ready to hand to deal with the critical problem of the depression.

Was O'Reilly's agitation for the enlargement of the canal wise and far-seeing? In the very year in which the legislature voted for

the enlargement of the canal, the first steam railway entered Rochester. Was it therefore something less than far-sighted to agitate for the development of canal navigation, at a time when a new agency of transportation was coming into being? Superficially, it might seem as if this question would have to be answered in the affirmative. But if one looks a little more deeply into the facts, one discovers that the Erie Canal remained for a long time after 1838 the principal means of transportation through the state of New York, and that the high point of its usefulness (the maximum development of its traffic) was not reached until the middle of the decade of the fifties. Looking at the matter, then, from this point of view, it seems clear that Henry O'Reilly was not only faithfully representing the necessities of his community in the agitation with which he had so much to do, but was promoting a development which was eminently desirable from the viewpoint of his time and of the decades immediately to come.

There was a second movement, fully as important as that which had to do with the canals, in which O'Reilly's name appears again and again. This was the movement for the improvement of the schools of Rochester.

The decade of the thirties is remarkable not only in New York but throughout the Northern states for the developing interest in education. The great wave of liberalism which characterized the period expressed itself nowhere more vigorously than in the field of the schools. There was much to be done to improve them, for in most of the country only the most rudimentary educational conditions existed. This was true of Rochester when O'Reilly took up his residence in the community on the Genesee.

The Rochester schools had begun on the district system, that is, they bore no relation whatsoever to the community as a whole. One district might be well run, according to the standards of the time; another might be little short of infamous. One district might pay its teachers fairly well; another might grant little more than sweat-shop wages. True, when the city was incorporated in 1834, the Common Council was given the power to act in the capacity of Commissioner of Schools, and was given a broad kind of supervisory authority. But these powers were almost never exercised, and the districts struggled along without any substantial support from the municipality. As late

as 1839 three districts within the city lacked school-houses, one of them renting a room in an old cooper's shop. Each separate school was kept only as long as the funds of the district permitted, some of them for only three or four months a year.

Into the movement for the improvement of the public schools, O'Reilly flung himself with characteristic energy. In 1836 a public meeting in Rochester provided for the appointment of a citizens' committee called "The Committee for Elevating the Standards of Common School Education." It provided for the circulation of a sheet called "The Common School Assistant," and engaged young A. C. Pratt as a kind of propagandist to go through the county calling attention to the educational needs of the communities. It continued its work during 1837 and 1838, and in November of the latter year recommended an "entirely free common school system, supported by a general tax on real and personal property." A little later, on December 1, 1838, a resolution was adopted looking to the organization of a Board of Education which would appoint a superintendent of public schools, and which would have "districts so arranged and schools so regulated as to allow of gradation in public English education." A committee of fifteen was appointed to urge the adoption of this policy upon the Common Council and the legislature.

It took time, however, to reach the desired goal. Today it is difficult for us to realize that the expenditure of funds for educational purposes was often opposed a century ago as an unnecessary coddling of the masses. There were Americans in that day who wished to keep the less fortunate in their place, and could see no point in making it possible for them to rise in the social and economic scale. The improvement of our schools, like most important steps in social progress, did not come about with the unanimous adhesion of all citizens, but had to be struggled for, as most good things *do* have to be struggled for.

But Henry O'Reilly had no doubt as to what needed to be done. At every stage he supported in the pages of the *Advertiser* the contemporary agitation. And in the spring of 1841 he drew up a memorial on the school question which received wide circulation throughout the state and which was one of the factors in securing the passage of a bill amending the city charter and providing for reforms of the first

order of importance. The law of 1841 provided for the election of a board of education, composed of two members from each ward, which should have power to appoint a superintendent of schools, and which was charged with the financial authority necessary to the building up of the school system. The system to be established was to be public and free. Sixteen years before the state of New York entirely abolished the rate bill system, and early enough to become the fourth city of the state to do this, Rochester in 1841 set up an educational machinery which was hailed at the time, and with reason, as a great advance. The citizens of Rochester showed their appreciation of the role that O'Reilly had played in the battle for the school law by electing him to the Board of Education constituted under it. There is no room for doubting his notable public service in this regard.

O'Reilly's interest in the improvement of the educational standards and opportunities of Rochester was shown in another way when he was prominent in the organization, in 1838, of what was known as the Young Men's Association, and of which he became president. The special circumstance which promoted the growth of this important agency in the early life of Rochester was, interestingly enough, the commission of the first murder which had ever taken place in the city in 1837. This untoward event, says O'Reilly, directed public attention to the necessity of establishing institutions for "presenting intellectual and moral attractions to counteract the vicious allurements to which (as legal examinations proved) the young men of this city were largely exposed." It was resolved that what was particularly needed was a library and educational program, and the establishment of a center which should serve as an alternative, as O'Reilly high-mindedly put it, to "eating-houses, with each a newspaper and a bar—bowling alleys, with their temptations to drinking and their temptations to betting — gaming tables with their enthralling allurements and their degrading companionships—and enticement to every vicious indulgence—diligently provided by those who excite appetite and feed passion for the sake of emolument." Accordingly, funds were found to rent the second floor of a building on State Street, and there to provide the first public reading room and city library in the history of Rochester. There were small membership dues, and books could be taken out only by accredited borrowers — but the library itself was open to all, and the provision for taking out books was the first that had been made. By

the close of 1838 the library counted more than 2000 volumes, and the membership included 139 full subscribers, and 97 others holding reading room privileges.

Once started on this hopeful project, O'Reilly's soaring imagination carried him further. He attempted to raise funds for a city library to be erected by the Association, and took an option on two lots at the corner of State and Mumford Streets with this end in view. An attempt was made to sell stock for the promotion of this project at \$50 a share, but this project failed, like so many others in which O'Reilly was financially concerned, and the energetic editor of the *Advertiser* had to pay \$400 out of his own pocket as a result of his premature action. On the other hand, O'Reilly was more successful in securing the amalgamation of the Young Men's Association with the Athenaeum, an earlier venture in the field of literary and educational activity. The union of the two still further enlarged the library resources of the Association, and by the close of 1840 there were over 2500 volumes available to members, and membership had risen to 409.

It would be pleasant to believe that the impetus thus given to the love of learning was permanent in its effects. Unfortunately, the facts are otherwise. After O'Reilly's removal from the city the activities of the Association declined. But the work that was done in this early period was not in vain. It served, no doubt, as an inspiration to the efforts of the late forties, when an attempt was made to pump new energy into the educational current of Rochester. And, wholly apart from its practical results, it is highly characteristic of O'Reilly himself. His generous impulses, his democratic instincts, and his intellectual energy all contributed to make him feel keenly the necessity of an educational advance. In taking the position that he did, he was acting in the most elevated spirit of his own time.

### The Local Historian

The year 1838, which saw the establishment of the Young Men's Association, was also the year in which O'Reilly published his *Sketches of Rochester*, the first important descriptive work published in and with regard to the city on the Genesee. The occasion for this work the author describes in his preface. In 1836, in response to a request from the city corporation, O'Reilly had published some statis-

tical data on the community in which he lived in pamphlet form. The success of this venture emboldened him to go further. He was encouraged by Everard Peck and Thomas Kempshall to carry his project through, and these two men assisted him in securing a publisher. In the winter of 1838 the committee which had the work in charge travelled by the only conveyance then possible, the stage-coach, all the way to New York, taking five days to do so, "with good sleighing," to put in the hands of Harper Brothers the manuscript of this important work. When it was published it sold at the price of \$1.50, or \$1.25 when ten copies were taken by a single subscriber. The first edition was quickly sold; but—quite characteristically, O'Reilly realized little financial profit from his venture. He had made the work more elaborate and more costly than had been originally proposed.

It would be extravagant to contend that the *Sketches of Rochester* was a great piece of literature. But it is fair to say that very few communities have enjoyed, in the early stages of their development, the services of a more conscientious or thorough chronicler. It is impossible to write the history of our city without frequent reference to O'Reilly. His work is invaluable as a contribution to local history. It is a mine of information on the economic and social development of a frontier community. And, in the life of a busy editor, and active citizen, it represents no inconsiderable achievement.

The year 1838, which connects with so many of O'Reilly's activities, must now be connected with one more. The editor of the *Advertiser*, as we have seen, had always been interested in politics. He had acquired a small political office in 1832. He had run for the state Assembly—unsuccessfully—in 1837. In 1838 the postmaster of Rochester resigned. The friends of the man who must by now have been one of Rochester's most prominent Democrats, perhaps the most prominent Democrat, rallied to present him for the vacant office. O'Reilly himself was absent in New York at the time, and does not seem to have bestirred himself particularly. But on May 24, 1838, his Presidential commission came through, and from that time forward until his removal from Rochester, he performed the duties of this important office. It is difficult to arrive at any clear evaluation of his service in this regard. He is said to have done great work in reducing the number of robberies in the mails. He certainly became well known to many influential Democrats, and established connections which were useful

to him in the future. But it may be also that in accepting the position of postmaster, he gave unnecessary hostages to fortune; the work may well have been distracting; and it exposed him, of course, to prompt political reprisal when the Whigs came into office in the elections of 1840. These were the days of the very perfection of the spoils system. There could be only one answer to the question of what to do with postmasters who had the bad judgment to belong to the opposite political party, and that was to get rid of them. O'Reilly, in common with others of his political creed, was soon made to walk the plank; and it seems probable that his dismissal from the post-mastership had something to do with his removal from Rochester at the end of 1842, or in the very beginning of 1843.

But the editor and author of the frontier was so constituted, at any rate while in his thirties, that he could not be long without a cause; he must always be promoting something; and the cause that now caught his eye, and that offered also an opportunity to earn a living, was the cause of constitutional reform. The constitution of New York state had undergone revision in 1821; but in many respects it was still archaic in 1842. Unlike the constitution that preceded it, it had provided for a procedure by which it might be amended; but somehow or other this procedure, with a single exception, had failed signally to function in practise. There were a number of respects in which, from the view-point of the liberal forces of the time, changes were indicated by the beginning of the forties. It was thought, for example, that the judiciary should be made elective, rather than appointive; it was thought that the terms of members of the legislature ought to be shortened; and still more, the disturbances which had broken out in the Hudson Valley, where a semi-feudal system of land-holding still persisted, seemed to call for a drastic alteration of the existing law.

## The Albany Years

The revamping of the constitution was just the kind of a cause that Henry O'Reilly enjoyed serving; and it must have been in his mind when he left Rochester in 1842, for he then accepted the editorship of the *Albany Atlas*, a journal which advocated constitutional reform. But journalism was not enough. In 1843 O'Reilly started the

organization of what was called the State Constitutional Association. He became a member of its Executive Committee; he persuaded one of the most powerful Democratic politicians in the state, Michael Hoffman, to accept the post of leader; and he initiated an agitation for the calling of a constitutional convention. This agitation bore fruit in the legislative action of 1845, in an overwhelming popular vote in favor of a convention, and in the constitutional convention of 1846. The reforms which have been mentioned above were adopted, and O'Reilly had the satisfaction of seeing the work of the convention accepted by the people at the polls.

But before this day had come the ebullient Irishman had made another change of base. When he had transferred his activities from Rochester to Albany, he seems to have indulged the hope that, since the Democrats were in power, he might secure the state printing. By this time he was thoroughly familiar with the mixing of business and politics, and had, indeed, almost continually held some office such as was dealt out in the thirties to deserving members of the party. But something slipped; the Democrats, badly divided into factions, could not unite on the Irishman as their candidate for printer; O'Reilly belonged quite clearly to the radical wing; and it is probable that in this as at other times he took very little pains to moderate his opinions or to express them other than with vehemence. The warring groups in the legislature united upon a compromise candidate; and O'Reilly, after only a brief period with the *Atlas*, transferred his energies to the New York State Agricultural Society, and became its Recording Secretary. But here again the pickings apparently were insufficient and after a short time in this post O'Reilly, like many another American, turned from the slim rewards of daily labor to the glowing opportunities of successful promotion.

### His Telegraph Ventures

The middle forties mark a very decided change in the personality of this interesting man. The impulse for reform, the zeal for causes, the political ardor, never completely deserted him; indeed he was usually able to rationalize his conduct in terms of some great popular good. But after 1844 O'Reilly became interested in making money in a big way. He had certainly been conspicuously unsuccessful up to

this time; he had left Rochester in debt; he had not demonstrated any extraordinary business capacity at any time; but perhaps these very facts tempted him to some kind of scheme for easy and rapid accumulation; his temperament made it easy for him to see immense possibilities for the future in a new invention; and the year 1844 was the year of the first American telegraph. As is well known, on the 24th of May of that year, Samuel F. B. Morse, having persuaded Congress to appropriate the funds for an experimental line from Washington to Baltimore, had sent the famous message, "What hath God wrought?" over the wire. A new era of communication was thus ushered in.

There were those, in 1844, of course, who did not think so. Morse offered his invention to the federal government for the modest sum of \$100,000; and it is interesting to reflect upon the acumen of the Postmaster-General of that day, who reported that he was uncertain that the revenues from the telegraph could be made equal to the expenditures. Disappointed by this rebuff, Morse turned to private capital, and early in the story of the development of his invention, Henry O'Reilly appears upon the scene.

How came it that he was projected into this new field of endeavor? The answer lies in his friendship with Amos Kendall, who had been Postmaster-General of the United States under Jackson and Van Buren. Kendall had been selected by the Morse patentees, (there were four of these), to represent them as their business agent. In June of 1846, he signed a contract with O'Reilly, calling for the "construction of a line of Morse's Electro-Magnetic Telegraph to connect the great seaboard line at Philadelphia, or at such other convenient point on said line as may approach nearer Harrisburg, in Pennsylvania, and from thence through Harrisburg and other intermediate towns to Pittsburg, and thence through Wheeling and Cincinnati, and such other towns and cities as the said O'Reilly and his associates may elect, to St. Louis and to the principal towns on the lakes." Here, so it seemed to the former Rochester editor, was a princely grant indeed, little less than the concession of a great telegraphic empire in the most rapidly growing part of the country, the booming middle West.

Whoever reads carefully the contract that I have just quoted can readily appreciate what troubles lay in its vague and wholly lawyer-like phraseology. Amos Kendall, it is clear, believed that he was giv-

ing to O'Reilly merely a right of construction in a telegraph system which should remain under a single and undivided ownership and control. He believed, furthermore, that he was conferring on the other party to the contract nothing more than a commission to construct telegraph lines, not the right to manage them, or to become a kind of telegraph baron with a dominating interest in any of them. But O'Reilly had a wholly different view of the matter. What he did was to start the organization of a whole series of companies, independent of one another, and extending over — and finally beyond — the great area in which the contract gave him the right to operate. Nor was he without the desire to play a part in the management of the lines. He hoped to use his position to secure wide stock interests. Those interests would carry with them, of course, a very substantial measure of control over the companies which he was successful in organizing.

The difference of opinion that soon developed between O'Reilly and the Morse patentees goes to the heart of some very interesting problems of business organization, as those problems presented themselves in the decades of the forties and fifties. It is tolerably clear to us today that the telegraph is a natural monopoly, and that the consolidation of the telegraph lines of the country has been, on the whole, a highly desirable consummation. But a hundred years ago, the fear of monopoly was keen. The nation had not long before expressed a decisive opinion on the question of the concentration of financial power in the Bank of the United States. It had emphatically supported Old Hickory in his war on that institution. Now there loomed the possibility of another monopoly, monopoly of a new and potentially significant means of communication. What could be more dangerous? In taking a contrary view of the problem, in organizing many local companies, and eventually in his fight with the Morse patentees, O'Reilly appeared in the characteristic role of the champion of the people and the foe of special interests. He was probably never more widely known, and never more popular, than in the late forties and early fifties; and there is little doubt that he gloried in this popularity, and pictured himself, (while engaged in the most far-reaching plans for personal gain), as the hero of a great fight for the common man.

There is another aspect of this question that ought to interest us. O'Reilly, in his energetic organization of telegraph companies all over

the country, undoubtedly performed a yeoman service in awakening the interest of local capital in what has become one of the great industries of the country. Where, indeed, in the late forties, was the capital to be found, except in the communities to be served? The country had not yet developed to the point where vast stock issues could have been floated in New York. The only practicable method of approach to the problem of securing funds was to go out and get them in the areas which were to be opened up. O'Reilly did just this. His methods were the methods of his time. That they aroused a tremendous interest in the new means of communication, and that, despite the final collapse of his hopes and of his fortunes, these efforts were by no means wasted, is clear.

O'Reilly's financial methods look peculiar and by no means prudent from the angle of vision of 1944. The funds raised by the sale of stock were used for the construction of the lines. The companies which O'Reilly organized were apt to begin business with a large part of the money which had been raised to set them off already expended. But, however imprudent this may appear today, it was not regarded as foolish in 1845. The unlimited optimism of the American temperament in the period before the Civil War is difficult for us to understand today. But it made possible business practices that would now be universally condemned as unsound.

None the less, we must not, in our understanding of O'Reilly's motives and view-point, attempt an apologia for him. The judgment of James D. Reid, who had been his assistant in the post-office at Rochester and whom he brought into the telegraph business, does not seem an uncharitable one. "Henry O'Reilly," he wrote in 1879, "was in many respects a wonderful man. His tastes were cultivated. His instincts were fine. He was intelligent and genial. His energy was untiring, his hopefulness shining. His mental activity and power of continuous labor were marvelous. He was liberal, generous, profuse, full of the best instincts of his nation. But he lacked prudence in money matters, was loose in the use of it, had little veneration for contracts. . . . He formed and broke friendships with equal rapidity, was bitter in his hates, and impatient of restraints." This characterization is sound. And the criticism which it contains will be found to be amply justified by the history of O'Reilly's telegraph companies.

From the beginning, of course, O'Reilly, in his fulfilment and elaboration of his contract with Kendall, had many difficulties to contend with. He was reasonably successful in securing the funds for the construction of the Pennsylvania line as Jonathan Child, Samuel L. Selden, Hervey Ely, Alvah Strong and many others are found amongst the subscribers. But his contract called for the completion of the line within six months of the signing of the agreement. O'Reilly and those associated with him had, of course, not the slightest experience in constructing telegraph lines. They were the pioneers, working without the technical knowledge that could only be gained in that day from experience. They had no models to follow. As winter came on, their troubles multiplied. At the end of November a storm broke their wire (which they had drawn tightly in the belief that transmission was aided by a taut line) in a hundred places. When the 13th of December arrived, the line had not been completed. The contract of O'Reilly with the Morse patentees was by any strict construction, null and void.

Of the patentees, however, (and there were four of them) only one, the villain of the piece in most accounts of telegraph history, F. O. J. Smith, was anxious at this time to take advantage of O'Reilly's predicament. Morse and Kendall, the business agent, were willing to be generous. O'Reilly had worked hard. His difficulties had been great. He might still be a very effective helper. Why not let him go ahead? During the year 1846, in fact, the line between Philadelphia and Pittsburg was made ready for business. Time was to show that it was flimsily constructed, and some of it had to be rebuilt as early as the fall of 1849. But at the outset of the telegraph era in 1846 no one could know this.

Meanwhile O'Reilly went ahead with other projects. A line was constructed between Boston and New York; another was started to run west from Cincinnati to Pittsburg and Louisville. Often the difficulties seemed almost insuperable. In one night a storm in New England produced 170 breaks in a stretch of 30 miles. The ambitious Irishman was in financial difficulties. His files for the winter of 1847 are full of duns and protested notes. He had to plead with Rochester merchants for more time for his grocery and clothing bills, and even to beg credit for a ton of coal for his home.

There seems little doubt, moreover, that he had gone beyond his powers, as defined in his contract. In order to get his companies started he issued stock which, it was alleged, represented an interest in the patents themselves. His organization of separate companies was directly contrary to the desires of Kendall and of the patentees. In addition, F. O. J. Smith managed to persuade his associates virtually to hand over to him the control of the patent interests, and by this time Kendall, concluding that O'Reilly was not to be trusted, went over to the opposition. The patentees began to construct competing lines; they sought to close the lines they did construct to O'Reilly business. Though a temporary injunction restraining O'Reilly was denied them in 1847, they went ahead making more and more trouble for him. Efforts at compromises were blocked by the dominating personality of Smith. The struggle waxed hotter and hotter.

In the popular view O'Reilly was the hero of this bitter battle. He had had the vision to propose lower rates on telegraph service for newspapers than his rivals, and he also hit upon the sound principle of lower rates for quantity service. He was the gallant David directing his sling against the burly giant Goliath.

"The steed called lightning (says the Fate)  
Is owned in the United States.  
'Twas Franklin that caught the horse.  
'Twas harnessed by Professor Morse.  
With Kendall's rein the steed went shyly,  
Till tamed and broke by H. O'Reilly."

So chanted the friends of the fighting Irishman.

But unfortunately O'Reilly never knew when to stop. There might have been some color of right in his activities in the region north of the Ohio. There could be none whatever when he sought to construct lines south of the river, and he knew it. In order to make his case stronger in this region, he bought the patents to a telegraphic instrument described as the Columbian, and that has been described by Alvin F. Harlow as the "most absurd imitation and infringement of the Morse system that supposedly sane men ever tried to get away with." The only excuse that can be given for him is that he was so ignorant of mechanisms as not to realize how bald a fraud this was. But naturally the Morse interests took advantage of the situation. In

1848 the District Court declared against O'Reilly. His instrument was declared to be an infringement of the Morse patent. Of course O'Reilly appealed. But the years of litigation that followed naturally did not help his financial situation. And in 1853, the Supreme Court, in a decision rendered by Chief Justice Taney, dealt the interests which O'Reilly represented what was virtually a death blow. After this time the ebullient Irishman appears only infrequently in connection with the history of the telegraph. Some of the lines which he had built virtually disintegrated; others were developed by other men into powerful agencies of communication. But none owed anything of their further growth to him. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he had strayed into fields in which his talents were not conspicuous, and, indeed, in the years that followed, he was to be a rather pathetic figure, never attaining success, from time to time seeking once again to capitalize his talent for popular controversy, and for popular causes, but rarely doing so with any profit to himself.

It is curious that O'Reilly, in this decade of the fifties, never took any important part, so far as can be discovered, in the slavery controversy. The probable explanation lies in his close affiliations with the Democratic party. One might have thought that such an issue as this would decidedly appeal to him. But O'Reilly was a partisan Democrat, and it may well be that he hesitated to cut loose from his old associations. At any rate, at no time does he appear as a militant foe of the extension of slavery, let alone of the "peculiar institution" itself, and his migration, as a chronic office-seeker, from the Democratic into the Republican party was not successfully effected until somewhere around 1869.

### Years of Discouragement

In the intermediate years between 1853 and 1869 he interested himself in a number of unsuccessful ventures. He started a project for the improvement of the Des Moines River, in Iowa. But before long he fell to quarreling with his associates, was kicked out of the company which he had helped to form, and had to content himself with the meager satisfaction of exposing some of its irregularities before the Iowa legislature. In 1859, returning to New York, he engaged in a more congenial and more successful battle, a battle to pro-

tect the canals of New York State against the hostility of the railroads. But the victory which he won in a campaign for the further enlargement of the canals left him once more without employment. Two years later we find him president of a concern called the American Terracultor Company, located in Rochester. This company was organized to manufacture a machine which would supplant the plow, and which, instead of turning the soil, dug up the ground and pulverized it by means of forks attached to endless chains, cutting a strip of land forty inches in width and ten inches in depth. But matters did not go smoothly here, either, and in addition the period of his connection with the terracultor was saddened by the death of his son at the battle of Williamsburg. In 1863 we find him acting as Secretary of an Association for promoting Colored Volunteering, and acting in conjunction with Peter Cooper to see to it that such volunteers would be authorized and credited to the quota of New York State. In 1867 we find him once more attacking his old foe, the railroads, and becoming Secretary of the National Anti-Monopoly Cheap Freight Railway League, which had as its fantastic object the construction of railway lines which should be open to free competition for the transportation of freight and passengers, but which is interesting as an early expression of the popular resentment against the growing power and arrogance of the railway systems of the country. On this project O'Reilly got exactly nowhere, and his own compensation in connection with it was so small that it did not meet his living expenses. During all this time, it would appear, he was constantly in debt, dependent often upon the generosity of his creditors.

In 1869, however, O'Reilly secured an appointment in the New York Customs House as store-keeper. This job, which could hardly have been particularly lucrative, he attempted to supplement by editorial work for one or another of the New York papers, forming a temporary connection with the *World* and with the *Tribune*. But his old flair for editorial writing seems to have deserted him, and he could give satisfaction neither to Manton Marble nor to Horace Greeley, the editors of the sheets in question. He was busy during this period with his Memoirs, and with the arrangement and collection of his historical papers; but the first of these two tasks he never completed.

In 1878, moreover, misfortune befell him. Rutherford B. Hayes, elected President in 1877, was one of the first Presidents to put into

practise, and against strong opposition, the principles of civil service reform; and the Presidential axe was soon whetted for Alonzo B. Cornell, the Collector of the Port of New York, to whom O'Reilly had owed his appointment as store-keeper. At the age of 72, then, O'Reilly was removed from office. He continued to live in New York till 1884, when he returned once more to the scene of his youthful successes, the city of Rochester. There he died, in St. Mary's Hospital on the 17th of August, 1886, and was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery, the site for which he had been instrumental in selecting nearly fifty years before. He had, at one time, lapsed from the Catholic faith, but in these last years of his life he returned to it, and before his death received extreme unction, according to Catholic ritual.

The career which we have thus been analyzing was certainly not, from the worldly point of view, a successful one. O'Reilly was devoid of the qualities that make for achievement in the business world. He was improvident, rash and by no means easy to deal with. To the eye of the hyper-critical, he might well appear as one who had a professional interest in controversy, in stirring up trouble, in which he generally found himself brilliant and inextricably involved. But any such judgment would be not only partial, but far too severe. O'Reilly was a man of very generous impulses, of very substantial capacities, and of some measure of successful achievement. In particular is this true of the period that he spent in Rochester. He identified himself during that period with a number of important causes, with the development of the Erie Canal, which (it must never be forgotten) played a fundamental role in the growth of the state down to the Civil War, and on which the prosperity of this city depended, with the establishment of a great step forward in the system of public education, with the first feeble steps towards the maintenance of a public library, with the development of a newspaper which has had a continuous existence since 1826. On a larger scale his activities seem, in retrospect, to be futile and ill-judged. Perhaps they were. But here too it must not be forgotten that he was a popular hero to many Americans in the early part of the fifties, and that, crude as were his methods, and wrong as were many of his decisions, he expressed something that needed to be expressed in his opposition to unrestricted monopolistic control of an important industry. The remedy for such control was emphatically not the remedy that he envisaged. It was not competition, but

regulation, that was finally to be judged necessary in the telegraph industry. But it would have been difficult for an American of his period to have foreseen this. After all, the era of regulation was to come after O'Reilly was in his grave. No one contends that here was a great man. But surely here was an interesting man, a man towards whom a charitable judgment is easy, a man whose generous impulses command respect, and whose life was not devoid of service to his fellows.

*Bibliographical Note:* This effort to present a full length picture of Henry O'Reilly in brief compass has been greatly facilitated by a master's thesis written by Sister Miriam Monaghan at the Catholic University of America. A typed copy of her study, *Henry O'Reilly: Journalist and Promoter of the Telegraph*, has generously been made available by a gift to the Rochester Historical Society. In addition to his own published works, cited in the paper, the fat volume by James D. Reid, *The Telegraph in America* (Albany, 1878), and Carleton Mabec's *The American Leonardo: A Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (New York, 1943), have proved useful.

